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Collection and dissemination of statistics by the United Nations Statistics Division

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report has been prepared at the request of the Statistical Commission at its thirty-eighth session. It describes ongoing activities and recent developments in the work programme of the United Nations Statistics Division with respect to data collection and dissemination. Also discussed are the initiatives taken by the Statistics Division to better coordinate data-collection activities by international agencies, to provide easy access to the United Nations system data and to facilitate the exchange of experience among developing countries with respect to data dissemination policies and practices. Points for discussion are included in paragraph 22.

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I. Introduction

1. The management of global databases in the areas of demographic and social statistics, national accounts, and trade, industry, energy and environment statistics is one of the pillars of the work of the United Nations Statistics Division. It is an integral part of the overall programme of the Division and is closely related to its methodological work and technical cooperation activities. The Statistics Division reports periodically to the Statistical Commission on this segment of its work, doing so most recently in 2002 and 2003. This document, provided at the request of the Statistical Commission at its thirty-eighth session,[1] includes a brief update on recent developments with respect to the data work of the Statistics Division, and, in the second section, goes beyond simply describing the Division's own data processes to discuss its role in supporting the global data flows. In particular, it reviews initiatives taken by the Division to better coordinate data-collection activities by international agencies, to provide easy access to United Nations system data and to facilitate the exchange of experience among developing countries with respect to data dissemination policies and practices.

II. The United Nations Statistics Division data programme

A. Data collection

2. The general mandate for the Statistics Division to collect and disseminate statistics in specific subject matter areas dates back to the early years of the United Nations. The specific mandate for the recurrent statistical print publications is given every two years by the Statistical Commission as part of the approval of the overall Division workplan. Currently, the Division disseminates the information received from countries through its questionnaires in a variety of print publications and online databases. The list of Division questionnaires or data requests to be sent to countries in 2008 is presented in annex I. To assist our data providers in planning and monitoring the requests for data that they receive, this information will also be made available through a calendar posted on the Division website, with links to each of the questionnaires.

3. When the Statistics Division last reported to the Commission on its data work in 2003 (see E/CN.3/2003/26), a detailed description of all Division data collections was presented in the annex of that report. Furthermore, an assessment of the quality dimensions of the Division databases with respect to periodicity, timeliness, geographical coverage, response rates, sources of the data collected, data-sharing agreements, collection instruments, metadata, data processing and editing procedures was included. Basically, that report still accurately describes the core of the Statistics Division data-collection activities. Some of the recent additions and/or changes in the Division data-collection programme are as follows:

- A new regular data collection covering trade in services statistics has been introduced, starting in 2006, based on a request by the Statistical Commission;

[1] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2007, Supplement No. 4* (E/2007/24), chap. I, sect. A.

- A special initiative has been undertaken in national accounts to increase electronic communication, which has country coverage;
- A new housing questionnaire to be sent to countries at the end of the year is being finalized;
- The data collection for industrial commodity production statistics is now based on a revised United Nations list of industrial products that was established in 2005;
- A common data quality framework to be developed based on the existing quality procedures in the various subject matter areas is under consideration.

B. Data dissemination

4. The Statistics Division disseminates the data it compiles in its printed publications and electronic outputs as well as on the Internet. A full listing of all statistical products for the 2008-2009 biennium is presented in annex II. The general dissemination policy for United Nations publications has been established by the United Nations Publications Board. According to official policy, publications are distributed free of charge to Member States missions to the United Nations, the United Nations libraries and United Nations depository libraries and Statistics Division partners in the global statistical system, i.e. national and international statistical services. Sale of Division publications is the responsibility of the Sales Section of the United Nations Secretariat. Statistical products continue to be among the largest revenue earners in the Sales Section.

5. With respect to pricing policies, a dilemma exists between meeting a legitimate official and public need for free access to information and maintaining the potential for earning revenues through sales, as mandated by United Nations publication policies. Revenue potential of statistical products has to be balanced against the increasing insistence by Member States that statistical products be made available free of charge. Member States argue that the Statistics Division should not charge the public for data which are provided free by their statistical offices. Technicians in the national statistical offices of the developing countries depend upon methodological manuals and handbooks for their work, but typically cannot afford to purchase them. Data customers have repeatedly pointed out that the databases produced by the Statistics Division, which contain global development information, are a "public good". In fact, the increasing use of the Internet for the dissemination of data, and for making methodological publications widely available, has allowed the Statistics Division to provide its users easier access to its statistical products.

6. It was precisely this concern to provide users quick and free access to the various Statistics Division databases that motivated the major innovation in data dissemination practices of the Division in the form of the project "Statistics as a Public Good", which was launched at the end of 2005 with Statistics Sweden and the Gapminder Foundation, with the financial support of the Swedish International Development Collaboration Agency. The objective of the project was to develop a new online Data Access System (UNdata) by which the Statistics Division would increase the dissemination, use and understanding of global statistics.

7. The project built on the United Nations Common Database, developing a data access system that met the Division vision of providing an integrated information resource with current, relevant and reliable statistics free of charge for all. The underlying philosophy was to create a powerful data search engine that would allow the maintenance of a federated database system, and at the same time would give access to all Division databases through an Internet-based single entry point, thus enabling the user to retrieve and use multidisciplinary statistical data. A more detailed description of the United Nations data portal, including its data visualization features and the management of metadata, will be provided to the Commission in a background document.

8. The first version of the United Nations data portal was completed and tested in 2007. User feedback from a soft launch to the international statistical community was overwhelmingly positive. The public launch of the United Nations data portal is planned for early 2008. It should be noted that the dissemination of data through the Internet has permitted the Statistics Division to establish a more direct communication channel with users. Since most Division print publications have been provided to the public by intermediaries such as librarians and documentalists or sold by commercial wholesalers, it used to be more difficult to identify actual users and learn about the use to which they put the data they acquired. Nowadays, though, information about the users as well as their opinions and expectations can be sought through user satisfaction surveys via the Internet.

III. Initiatives to support the global data flow

9. In addition to its own data production for the databases for which the Statistics Division is the global custodian, the Division also supports the global data flow to help to ensure efficient transmission of data produced at the national level to a variety of global users. This coordination function is primarily derived from the role of Division Secretariat to both the Statistical Commission and the inter-agency coordination process (Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities, previously the Administrative Committee on Coordination Subcommittee). This section briefly reviews three areas in which the Division is currently active, namely, the coordination of data collection among international agencies, the extension of the United Nations data portal to include United Nations system data and the facilitation of the exchange of country experiences in the area of data dissemination.

A. Coordination of data collection among international agencies

10. The issue of coordination of data-collection activities and, thus, the reduction of the country reporting burden, has been a longstanding concern which appeared on the agenda of the United Nations inter-agency mechanism — the then-ACC Subcommittee on Statistics — almost since its inception. For example, in 1974, at its eighth session, the Subcommittee had agreed that all new questionnaires would be circulated to its members for comments (Coordination/R.1026, para. 106). Towards the end of the 1980s, the primary concern was with ad hoc statistical inquiries to countries from non-statistical units. The Subcommittee brought this to the attention of the higher-level organizational committee of the ACC, which decided at its October 1987 session that a clear policy should be developed in each

organization of the United Nations system requiring that the statistical unit of an organization be consulted prior to sending any statistical inquiry to a country.

11. In 1990, following a request by the Subcommittee to prepare a report on the statistical subject areas on which the statistical offices of the agencies collected data from countries, the office then known as the United Nations Statistical Office started to prepare an inventory of statistical data-collection activities by all statistical agencies. The inventory was later presented to and endorsed with satisfaction by the Statistical Commission at its twenty-eighth session.[2] The scope of the questionnaire inventory was extended over time to include over 400 data-collection activities by about 20 international agencies. For each data-collection activity, the inventory included information on the name of the questionnaire, the agency collecting the information, a short description of the questionnaire content, a unique identification number, the identification of the Government agency to which the inquiry was sent, its periodicity and date of dispatch as well as the mode of collection.

12. However, over time, questions arose about the usefulness of the inventory. In 1997, the Administrative Committee on Coordination Subcommittee on Statistical Activities reported to the Commission (see E/CN.3/1997/25, para. 4) that the inventory was in fact not a very effective tool for coordination for a number of reasons: (a) the inventory was not complete, since, for instance, ad hoc data collections were left out, (b) the information contained in the inventory sometimes had a time of two years lag, (c) the inventory was not specific enough about which items were actually being collected and (d) there was no evidence that the inventory was actually used or consulted, especially prior to the taking of decisions on new questionnaires. As the maintenance of the inventory was very resource-intensive, the Statistics Division ultimately stopped updating it in 1997.

13. As Member States continued to voice concerns about the insufficient coordination of statistical data collection by international agencies, the Division reported in 2002 to the Statistical Commission (see E/CN.3/2002/30) that it had sent out an inquiry to national statistical offices requesting them to identify specific examples of duplicate data requests by international organizations. Responses were received from 11 countries, and their replies were analysed and addressed by the then Administrative Committee on Coordination Subcommittee for Statistical Activities. In 2003, the Statistical Commission endorsed[3] the approach taken by the United Nations Statistics Division and the newly formed Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities regarding reviewing and resolving specific cases of data-collection duplication, and requested the Statistics Division and the Committee to continue working on this issue and to report on progress made. The Commission also encouraged Member States to continue to report instances of duplication of data collection at the international level to the United Nations Statistics Division.

14. This mandate given to the Statistics Division to act as a facilitator, through the CCSA, is still the official mechanism of the international statistical community for addressing duplication incidents. No concrete cases of duplication have recently been reported to the Statistics Division. International agencies have certainly

[2] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1995, Supplement No. 8* (E/1995/28), chap. XIV, para. 89.

[3] *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2003, Supplement No. 4* (E/2003/24), chap. V, sect. E, para. 11 (c) and (d).

cooperated, for instance, through the Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange (SDMX) initiative, in order to create an environment where data exchange is effective and the reporting burden on countries can potentially be reduced significantly. Nonetheless, it may be useful to restate the Commission's policy and encourage countries to bring instances of duplication of data collection to the attention of the Statistics Division.

B. United Nations data portal as a tool for easy access to United Nations system data

15. The position of the Statistics Division at the centre of the international statistical system presents it with both an advantage and a challenge when it comes to data dissemination. The advantage lies in the ability to obtain data from many national and international sources; the challenge lies in the need to process all the data received, which requires a highly efficient management and dissemination mechanism.

16. From the beginning, the United Nations data portal was designed in such a manner to allow for scaling up to include a wide range of United Nations system data. In fact, early close cooperation with experts from partner agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the International Labour Organization and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, whose cooperation is gratefully acknowledged, showed that the system was flexible enough to accommodate large data sets provided by United Nations partners. As the portal is based on the principle of federated databases, the data, as well as the metadata of partner agencies, are made accessible to users in their original form, with full source attribution. In this context, it is important to stress that the source agency retains full control of its data as well as full responsibility for the quality of the data.

17. As of November 2007, the United Nations data portal already included more than 50 million data items provided by six agencies. The Division presented the United Nations data portal and its functionalities at a meeting of United Nations system agencies in September 2007, and it was widely welcomed as a powerful tool which offers the users access to the broad universe of United Nations system data. Over the coming months, it can be expected that the United Nations data portal will continuously expand as additional data sets are linked with the system.

18. While at this stage the system is simply a provider of access services, it can also be expected that in the medium term it could contribute to the improvement of the data quality. By making it possible for users to retrieve data from a variety of sources at the same time, it will increase the analytical potential of the data by possibly highlighting the need for consistency and plausibility checks, thereby creating pressure on the various data providers to harmonize their data to the extent possible. This can even be taken one step further in the medium term by including national databases in the system, allowing the users to eventually retrieve and compare data from both national and international sources at the same time.

C. Exchange of country experiences with respect to data dissemination policies and practices

19. Cooperation among countries is fairly strong in the area of data production, and the professionals in the various subject matter areas, such as census managers and national accountants, have established close, global networks of communication. However, the same cannot be said about the area of data dissemination. Under the auspices of the Conference of European Statisticians there is a steering group on statistical dissemination and communication, but managers responsible for data dissemination in developing countries often tend to come up with their own specific national solutions, without the benefit of sharing experiences.

20. In order to provide a forum for the discussion and exchange of experience on the dissemination of data, the United Nations Statistics Division, in cooperation with the Department of Statistics of Malaysia and with the support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency organized a seminar on emerging trends and issues in data dissemination in Putrajaya, Malaysia, in August 2007. Thirteen experts responsible for data dissemination in their national statistical institutes, representing countries from all regions of the world, participated in the seminar. Several topics were covered, for example, at a discussion of general trends in data dissemination, where country representatives presented the current stage of their dissemination strategies and explained the ways in which they target different audiences and customize the presentation of their products for a wide variety of user groups. Communication of metadata, pricing policies and data visualization techniques were some other specific areas discussed.

21. Two key conclusions emerged from the exchanges: (a) that there is a general need to move from data dissemination to data communication and therefore countries will have to develop comprehensive communication strategies; (b) that there is considerable scope for countries to benefit from the exchange of experiences at the international level. The United Nations Statistics Division plans to provide such opportunities by organizing at least one or two more such seminars at a regional level in the coming year.

IV. Points for discussion

22. The Commission is invited to:

- Review the areas of the Statistics Division data collection
- Support Division efforts to create the United Nations data portal and encourage United Nations system partners to cooperate in this project
- Reconfirm the Division mandate to act as facilitator to address country concerns with respect to duplicate data requests, and encourage Member States to bring these cases to the attention of the Division
- Discuss experiences of countries and agencies in developing and implementing new dissemination tools and policies, including pricing policies; and recommend priority areas in the field of data dissemination, where countries and the international agencies can cooperate most usefully

Annex I

United Nations Statistics Division questionnaires or data requests to be sent to countries in 2008

Subject	*Questionnaire title or data request name*	*How dispatched*	*UNSD outputs in which the collected data will appear*	*Periodicity*	*When requests are expected to be sent in 2008*
Demog and Social	UN DYB questionnaire on population estimates	electronic version sent by e-mail	*Demographic Yearbook*	Annual	December 2008
Demog and Social	UN DYB questionnaire on vital statistics	electronic version sent by e-mail	*Demographic Yearbook*	Annual	December 2008
Demog and Social	UN DYB population census questionnaire on economic characteristics	electronic version sent by e-mail	*Demographic Yearbook*	Annual (first sent in the year after a census took place, then annually until response received)	August 2008
Demog and Social	UN DYB population census questionnaire on household characteristics	electronic version sent by e-mail	*Demographic Yearbook*	Annual (first sent in the year after a census took place, then annually until response received)	August 2008
Demog and Social	UN DYB population census questionnaire on general characteristics	electronic version sent by e-mail	*Demographic Yearbook*	Annual (first sent in the year after a census took place, then annually until response received)	December 2008
Demog and Social	Trial UN DYB questionnaire on housing	electronic version sent by e-mail	*Demographic Yearbook*	Annual	December 2008
Demog and Social	UN DYB questionnaire on international travel and migration statistics	electronic version sent by e-mail	*Demographic Yearbook*	Annual	December 2008
Energy	energy statistics questionnaire	pre-filled questionnaire in Excel sent by e-mail	Energy Statistics Database *Energy Statistics Yearbook Energy Balances and Electricity Profiles*	Annual	October 2008
Environment	questionnaire on environment statistics	pre-filled questionnaire in Excel format sent by e-mail	Environment Statistics Database Main Environmental Indicators Country Snapshots	Biennial; March of even years	March 2008
General	monthly bulletin of statistics questionnaire	by e-mail, fax and regular mail	*Monthly Bulletin of Statistics*, MBS Online, *Statistical Yearbook*	Monthly	January through December 2008 (2nd week of each month)

Subject	*Questionnaire title or data request name*	*How dispatched*	*UNSD outputs in which the collected data will appear*	*Periodicity*	*When requests are expected to be sent in 2008*
Transport	Transport questionnaire for *Statistical Yearbook* (3 questionnaires: motor vehicles in use, railways, international maritime)	pre-filled questionnaire sent by e-mail and fax	*Statistical Yearbook*, *World Statistics Pocketbook*, UN Common Database	Annual	January 2008
Industry	Industrial commodity production statistics questionnaire	pre-filled questionnaire sent by e-mail	Industrial Commodity Statistics Database, *Industrial Commodity Statistics Yearbook*, *Statistical Yearbook*	Annual	January 2008
Industry	Index numbers of industrial production questionnaire	pre-filled questionnaire in Excel format sent by e-mail	Index Numbers of Industrial Production Database, *MBS*, *Statistical Yearbook*	Quarterly	February, May, Aug. and Nov. 2008 (quarterly)
National Accounts	National accounts questionnaire	by e-mail or regular mail	*National Accounts Statistics: Main Aggregates and Detailed Tables*	Annual	October 2008
Trade	International merchandise trade statistics collection in electronic format	by e-mail and fax	UN Comtrade and the *International Trade Statistics Yearbook*	Annual	February 2008
Trade	Questionnaire on distributive trade statistics	by regular mail and electronically		Annual	Second quarter 2008
Trade	Statistics on international trade in services collection in electronic format	by e-mail and fax	UN Service Trade and the *International Trade Statistics Yearbook*	Annual	June 2008

Annex II

List of data publications under the United Nations Statistics Division 2008-2009 work programme

Recurrent publications:

- *Demographic Yearbook*, 2006 and 2007 editions (print) (2)
- *Demographic Yearbook*, special topic (2)
- *Vital Statistics Report* (4)
- Website on demographic and social statistics, quarterly update (8)
- Website on social indicators, twice-yearly update (4)
- Website on vital statistics, monthly update (24)
- *National Accounts Statistics: Main Aggregates and Detailed Tables*, 2005 and 2006 editions (print) (2)
- *National Accounts Statistics: Analysis of Main Aggregates*, 2005 and 2006 editions (print) (2)
- Website on national accounts, annual update (2)
- *Industrial Commodity Statistics Yearbook* (2)
- Website on industry statistics, annual update (2)
- *Energy Statistics Yearbook*, 2006 and 2007 editions (print) (2)
- *Energy Balances and Electricity Profiles*, 2006 and 2007 (print) (2)
- Energy statistics online database (1)
- Website on energy statistics, annual update (2)
- *International Trade Statistics Yearbook*, vols. I and II (print) (2)
- An online annex to the *Yearbook of International Trade Statistics*, vols. I and II (2008 and 2009)
- Website on international trade statistics (2)
- Comtrade databases on international merchandise trade statistics (Internet annual update) (2)
- Services trade database on statistics of international trade in services (Internet) (2)
- Website of the task force on statistics of international trade in services, annual update (2)
- Environmental country profiles, 2008 and 2009 (2)
- Website on environment statistics, annual update (2)
- *Statistical Yearbook*, 2008 and 2009 editions (print) (2)
- *Monthly Bulletin of Statistics*, 2008-2009 (print and Internet) (48)

- *World Statistics in Brief*, 2008 and 2009 editions (print and Internet) (4)
- Millennium Development Goals report and statistical annex for the Office of the Secretary-General (2)
- Millennium Development Goals indicators database, update (2)
- Glossy report on the Millennium Development Goals (2)
- Website on the Millennium Development Goals (2)
- Website of the Common Database, quarterly update (8)

Note: The number in brackets indicates the number of products for the biennium.